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SUBJECT: BHARAT BALLOT 09: CONGRESS WILL FLY SOLO, NOT AS
UPA

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The Congress Party has decided to fight coming parliamentary elections mostly alone and not as the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) alliance; it will only seek case-by-case seat-sharing understandings with allies at the state level. In making this decision, the Congress Party objective is to strengthen its position in seat-sharing negotiations with its UPA allies, check their growing national ambitions, and signal to smaller non-UPA parties that it will be ready to deal after the elections if they can pick up a few seats. End Summary.

Going it Alone

¶2. (U) The Congress Working Committee (CWC), the highest decision-making body of the Congress Party, formally decided on January 29 to contest the coming parliamentary elections without nationwide pre-poll alliances with any other party. Instead, it will consider "state-specific" seat sharing arrangements with regional allies on a case-by-case basis. Congress Party spokesman Janardhan Dwivedi made this announcement after a Sonia Gandhi-chaired CWC meeting that included the party's top strategists such as Rahul Gandhi, Digvijay Singh, and Ahmed Patel.

Poll Positioning

¶3. (U) The Congress Party announcement came as Indian political parties began to fine-tune their election strategies ahead of the campaign that will begin in March for polls that are expected to take place between mid-April and mid-May. It came only a few days ahead of rallies held by the Congress Party and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to kick off the campaigns. It is one of a steady stream of jockeying, feints, maneuvers and deals and counter-deals we will see play out as political parties try to position themselves for the elections and post-election coalition formation in May.

Pushing Back National Aspirations

14. (SBU) At a January 30 lunch hosted by PolCouns for several prominent journalists who cover domestic politics there was general agreement that this move was a bid by the Congress Party to reassert itself as the "big boy in the crowd" and the only "national" party among its dozen plus coalition partners. The journalists felt that the Congress Party was forced to publicly announce this strategy in order to check the increasing ambitions of regional allies who were eyeing parliamentary seats in areas outside their traditional strongholds. In particular Sharad Pawar's Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) and Mulayam Singh Yadav's Samajwadi Party (SP) have been demanding dozens of seats beyond their areas of strength in Maharashtra/Meghalaya and Uttar Pradesh (UP). The NCP has claimed 45 seats nationwide and projected Pawar as its Prime Ministerial candidate.

SP-Congress Tussle Rages On

15. (SBU) The Congress and the SP are locked in long-running and often testy negotiations on a pre-poll alliance. SP leader Amar Singh complained to PolCouns that the Congress Party is being difficult and unreasonable in its demands in UP and what it is willing to give the SP outside of UP. He said he wants to partner with the Congress but is starting to look for other allies if the Congress Party maintains its rigid position. In this context, he gloated about inducing the defection from the BJP of Kalyan Singh, who served as BJP

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chief minister of UP in the 1990s and has a considerable following within the small but powerful Lodh caste in the state.

UPA Break-up

16. (SBU) The journalists were not surprised at the Congress Party's announcement. Aditi Phadnis, who covers domestic politics for the Business Times, told PolCouns that this marks the "collapse of the UPA." She said the "break-up" was inevitable now that the government had run its full five year course and each member of the coalition now feels compelled to sharpen its positions which had been dulled and submerged as the parties operated in a multi-party coalition with partners of many ideological hues.

Comment: Short Term Tactics

17. (SBU) The Congress Party decision to reject any national pre-poll alliances with its UPA partners reflects its assessment of its short term prospects and long term interests. In the near term, if the Congress chose to fight the election as part of the UPA coalition instead of on its own, it would in effect be freezing itself at its 2004 strength. The party has assessed that it is now far stronger than it was in 2004, especially relative to many of its UPA partners, especially Karunanidhi's DMK in the south, Lalu Prasad's Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) in Bihar and Sharad Pawar's NCP in Maharashtra. The decision to go it alone allows the Congress Party to play tough with its allies on seat-sharing because it knows the allies need the Congress Party more than it needs them. With such pressure, the party believes it can get better terms in state-level pre-poll alliances and thus improve its chances of defending or improving on its current strength in Parliament.

Comment: Long Term Strategy

18. (SBU) The Congress Party also understands that in the long term it is vital that its allies be kept in their regional boxes. If any of the allies begin to go "national" by

gaining strength in areas outside their traditional bases, their growth will inevitably come at the expense of the Congress Party because it occupies the same ideological space as most of its UPA allies. It is logical then for the Congress Party to foreclose any nationwide alliances with its UPA partners, especially at a point when the partners are relatively weaker than the Congress Party itself.

Comment: Opening up the Bazaar

¶ 9. (SBU) The Congress Party decision to keep its allies at arms length by rejecting full-grown national alliances is also intended to keep its options open in the coalition formation maneuvers that will follow the elections. It is a clear signal to the dozens of other smaller non-UPA regional parties that doors may be open for them in a new Congress-led configuration after the elections if they can win some seats.

Many of these regional parties can easily coexist in a coalition with the Congress Party but not with one or another of the UPA allies with which they battle in the particular state or region.

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